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ABSTRACT

In addition to the usual problems of obtaining a representative sample, the family researcher is confronted with the problem of who speaks for the family. Traditionally women have been the informants in family research. To examine the coparental relationship between divorced spouses, data were collected from both former spouses (N=98 couples). The results supported the importance of using multiple informants in family research. However, conceptualizing the couple as the unit of quantitative analysis poses problems. Couple sum or mean scores may result in the loss of data and are most appropriate under the same conditions when responses from a sole respondent would suffice. For some analyses, separate reports of men's and women's responses are needed. Discrepancies in couples' responses provide useful information and may enhance an understanding of family dynamics. (JAC)

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Analysis of Couple Data: Theoretical and Methodological Issues

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In addition to the usual research problems of obtaining a representative sample and developing a reliable and valid research instrument, the family researcher is confronted with the problem of determining who speaks for the family. Is information from one family member sufficient? If not, how does one interpret discrepent responses obtained from multiple family members?

In this paper we will examine several current issues in couple research. First we will briefly address the theoretical issue of the appropriateness of couple vs. single respondent data. Then we will discuss some of the complexities and difficulties the researcher encounters in analyzing and interpreting the data when the couple is the unit of analysis. Drawing upon data from our current research project on divorced families we will then present some examples of preliminary analyses of couple data.

THE RESPONDENT: SHE, HE OR THEY?

Traditionally women have been the informants in family research. Blood and Wolf's classic study Husbands and Wives: The Dynamics of Married Living (1960) was based entirely on women's reports. The authors justify this by noting that "many previous studies have shown a close correlation between what husbands and wives say about their marriages, making it possible to rely on one partner's responses."[1] Similarly, Goode's study of post-divorce adjustment might more accurately be entitled Women After Divorce. It is to Goode's (1956:25) credit that unlike Blood and Wolfe he explains his reliance on women's responses by saying "... we are mainly interested in the problems as she experienced them; we have only interviewed her and not her husband." Thus Goode is somewhat more candid regarding the limitations of his work.

Levine (1976) notes that studies of "parenting" are usually studies of "mothering" or, at best, of parenting from a woman's perspective. He notes the irony of a 1969 study entitled "Father Participation in Infancy" -- one of the first studies to even acknowledge fathers' involvement with their young children -- which relied solely on interviews with mothers. LeMasters (1974) reports that a survey of family research published between 1963 and 1968 found only 11 of 444 papers relied on data obtained from husbands or fathers, and those studies probably relied solely on men's responses.

Intergenerational family research faces a compound problem -- not only may perceptions differ by sex, but also by generation. Yet most intergenerational research relies on a single respondent.

In recent years there has been increasing recognition that one may get a different picture of a family depending upon which family member one focuses. Although some attention has been paid to the question of spousal consensus, little attention has been directed to the matter of intergenerational consensus. Booth and Welch (1978) in their review of the spousal consensus literature suggest it can be broken down into two types: studies of consensus in attitudes and studies of consensus regarding shared events.

The majority of the shared event studies examine some aspect of power or decision-making in families. Booth and Welch (1978, p. 23) found that "the amount of consensus seems to vary widely from study to study on the same topic, and from topic to topic within the same study."

Some have attributed spousal discrepencies to random measurement error, ambiguities in the research instrument, and problems associated with self reporting (Davis, 1970; Douglas and Wind, 1970; Granbois and Willett, 1970; Scanzoni, 1965). It is this view which led Scanzoni to suggest that the husband's response was merely a validity check on the information given by the wife. In his study of thirty-one clergymen and their wives he found that on the average spouses were in "general agreement" (i.e. did not disagree by more than one point on a five point scale) on 73% of the items compared. Scanzoni (1965:112) then concluded that while the sufficiency of wife only responses was not fully demonstrable from his data, "the study does not support dismissing sole reliance on wife responses as invalid." He says:

> ... it does seem possible to suggest that whatever error the researcher allows by testing only one spouse, the amount of error involved is not so great as to be outweighted by the advantages of the alternative procedure.... The differences in perception and reporting between husbands and wives are not so great as to warrant halving the sample.
>
> (Emphasis in the original)

While random error and ambiguity in the research instrument undoubtedly contribute to discrepencies in spouses' responses, there is growing support for the possibility that differences in husbands' and wives' reports are due to real differences in men's and women's experiences and perceptions. These differences stem in part from socially prescribed sex roles (Herr, 1962; Larson, 1974; Munsinger, Weber, and Hansen, 1975; Olson and Rabunsky, 1972; Salfilios-Rothschild, 1969; Turk and Bell, 1972; and Van Es and Shingi, 1972). In addition to studies which have set out specifically to examine spousal consensus, researchers and clinicians who have had the opportunity to observe both men and women have found distinct "his" and "her" perceptions of marriage (Bernard, 1972), divorce (Weiss, 1976) and breaking up (Hill, Rubin and Peplau, 1976). Salfilios-Rothschild (1969:295) concludes:

> The examined data show that family research cannot rely solely on wives' answers as has been largely the practice up until now, unless we are willing to change the title of "family sociology" to "wives' family sociology" or "feminine family sociology." If however, we are interested in studying the family as a dynamic interacting unit, we have no choice but to conceptualize this unit as consisting of many points of view -- as many as there are family members.

INTERPRETATION OF COUPLE DATA

It is easy to understand why multiple informants are seldom treated as the unit to analysis. In addition to the increased costs of studying several

family members, treating the couple (or other family unit) as the unit of analysis poses difficult conceptual problems. If one assumes that one respondent merely provides a validity check on the other, then when the responses are discrepant one is faced with choosing the more valid response -- no easy task. If however, one assumes that each family member provides valid, though possibly different information, then one is faced not with choosing between responses, but with attempting to synthesize the responses and treat the couple (or other family unit) as the unit of analysis -- again, no easy task.

A systems theory perspective supports the contention that different family members will provide the researcher with different information based on members' differing experience within the family and the larger society. Research examining areas that have traditionally been strongly defined by sex roles will almost certainly find important differences between men's and women's responses.

A step toward meeting Salfilios-Rothschild's challenge has recently been taken by several divorce researchers. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) studied husbands, wives and children in divorced families. Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1976) studied both former spouses and a target preschool age child while Fulton (1979) obtained data from both men and women, many of whom were former spouses. All three projects report findings for men and findings for women, but none use the former couple, let alone a larger family unit, as the unit of analysis. In several instances, however, the researchers interpret their findings as if they were descriptive of the couple or family unit. It is not possible for the careful reader to follow this conceptual leap from analyses based on comparisons of aggregate scores of men, women and children to interpretation of the couple or family system dynamics.

Jenkins and Norman's (1972) study of filial deprivation in foster care provides a rare example of researchers attempting to utilize multiple informants as the unit of analysis. Eight-eight couples are questioned regarding the reasons their children were placed in foster care. Findings were reported separately for men and women and then a "commonality coefficient" was computed which allowed the researchers to identify the extent to which a reason was mutually reported by both a husband and wife.

THE STUDY

Although a continued, cooperative and mutually supportive relationship between divorced parents reduces the crisis-potentiating stress associated with divorce its dynamics remain relatively unexplored. Consequently our knowledge of the relationship between divorced spouses is based more on current stereotypes than on empirical investigation. This study[2] was designed to address this knowledge gap and provide empirical data on the reorganization of the divorced family postdivorce. The primary objective of this first phase was to examine and describe the coparental relationship between divorced spouses one year postdivorce. This study differs from most other studies of divorce in three major ways: 1) the sample was selected from a normal population; 2) data were collected from both former spouses;

3) the study focused directly on the postdivorce relationship between parents.

Sample: A sample of 196 divorced parents (98 pairs of former spouses) was selected from the 1977 and 1978 divorce court records in Dane County, Wisconsin. Because both former spouses had to agree to participate, the sample had to be limited to former spouses who continued to reside within the county. A further criterion for participation in the study was that the subjects had to have at least one minor child with whom the noncustodial father had at least minimal contact. "Minimal contact" was defined as having seen the child at least once during the two months prior to our contact.

The initial contact with the sample was by letter, followed up with telephone calls. The telephone calls were used to screen out the ineligibles and to request participation from those who were eligible. Interviewers then re-contacted the respondents who agreed to participate and scheduled appointments for interviews. Five waves of letters were sent to keep the one year postdivorce time period constant as interviewing progressed. Although sampling from the court records has the disadvantage of being costly in both time and money (due to difficulty in locating subjects), it has the advantage of avoiding some of the biases inherent in samples restricted to clinic populations and specific groups, e.g., parents without partners.

Data Collection: In depth, semi-structured interviews, lasting from 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 hours, were conducted in the respondents' homes. Interviews were developed and pretested in an extensive pilot study. Based on a multi-measure approach, the interview contained both open-ended and structured questions, two modified Q-sort procedures and a paper and pencil symptom checklist (SCL-90). Multiple indicators were used for most of the major variables under investigation and the interviews were conducted by graduate social work students with clinical interviewing experience. The interviewers were matched by sex with the respondents, which also insured that information from one spouse would not be passed on to the other. The interviews focused on a wide range of topics designed to assess the extent and quality of the relationship between former spouses one year post divorce. The data presented in this paper are limited to findings for respondents' feelings about his/her postdivorce situation, shared events, and satisfaction with aspects of the postdivorce situation.

Characteristics of Sample: Respondents ranged in age from 19 to over 60 with a mean age of 35. The mean years of education was 15.1 for men and 14.4 for women, with a range of 8 years of formal school attendance to completion of advanced and professional degrees. The average length of marriage was 11.1 years with a range of 1 to 26 years. The number of children per family ranged from 1 to 6 with a mean of two. At one year postdivorce, mean gross family income for fathers was $22,600 with a range of $3,500 to over $30,000. Mean family income for mothers (excluding child support and alimony) was $14,420 with a range from under $1,000 to over $30,000. While 40% (N=39) of the women reported current income under $10,000, only 5% (N=5) of the men reported such income.

The subsamples were quite similar demographically with one notable exception. The joint custody mothers tended to be better educated than mothers in the other custody groups.

Variables of Interest: Five scales were developed which asked respondents to use a five point scale (1=never; 5=always) to report the frequency of various shared events in their postdivorce relationship. The number of items per scale ranged between four and ten. These scales assessed: 1) the extent of the noncustodial parent's involvement in child-rearing acitivities;[3] 2) sharing of parental responsibilities; 3) the relationship of the former spouses in nonparental roles; 4) conflict; 5) support. Reliability on the five scales ranged from .87 to .92 for men and .86 to .95 for women.

Six other scales were developed to assess each respondent's own feelings about the divorce and his/her relationship with the former spouse. These scales assessed feelings of anger, guilt, attachment, amount of feelings toward the former spouse, positive feelings toward the former spouse, and feelings about the former spouse as a parent. The scales consisted of four to eight items with each item rated on a five point scale (1=always; 5=never). Scale reliabilities ranged from .58 to .86 for men and from .87 to .91 for women.

Five variables assessed respondents' satisfaction with specific aspects of their postdivorce situation. Respondents used a five point scale (1-very dissatisfied; 5- very satisfied) to answer the following questions:

1) How satisfied are you with the custody arrangement? (Sat. Custody)

2) How satisfied are you with the present parenting relationship between you and your former spouse? (Sat. Coparenting)

3) How satisfied are you with the amount of time you/your former spouse spends with the children? (Sat. Time)[4]

4) How satisfied are you with your relationship with your former spouse in the areas of nonparental relating that we have just talked about? (Sat. Nonparenting)

5) How satisfied are you with the amount of time you and your former spouse share with each other in relation to the children? (Sat. Amount Coparenting)

We will now present several examples of analytic strategies for data that has been collected from both partners. These analyses are preliminary: we present them for discussion and critique with the hope that out of the workshop will come new directions for analyzing and interpreting couple data.

These data will now be utilized to examine the feasibility and usefulness of employing the couple as the unit of analysis. First we will consider whether or not men's and women's responses are sufficiently different to warrent the expense of obtaining data from both former spouses. Secondly, we shall examine the use of couple sum scores as a means of treating the couple as the unit of analysis. Finally, the use of couple discrepency scores will be considered as an alternative means of treating the couple as the unit of analysis.

Sufficiency of Sole Respondents: In comparing the responses of men and women it is necessary not only to consider the degree of correlation between the responses given by a husband and wife, but also whether the responses are significantly different from one another.[5] As Figure 1 illustrates, variables may be significantly correlated, but at the same time significantly different. This was true of three of the sixteen scales and variables examined. For purposes of between group comparisons (e.g. comparing mother and joint custody subsamples) it would theoretically be acceptable to use either men's or women's responses if they were highly correlated even though they were significantly different. However, if one wishes to normatively describe the situation of divorced persons it is not sufficient that the responses of former spouses be highly correlated; they also must not be significantly different from one another. The nonresidential parent involvement scale provides an example. Even though responses of former spouses were highly correlated on this scale ($p \leq .001$), nonresidential parents saw themselves as significantly more involved in parenting than the residential parents perceived them to be. (See Ahrons, 1981; in press, for a more complete analysis and discussion of this variable). A scattergram revealed that in all but six couples in the mother custody subsample (N=54 couples) father's scores were higher than mothers. This accounts for the significant correlation based on the direction of the scores. This discrepency in former spouses responses should prompt the researchers not to speculate as to who is giving the more valid response, but rather to consider the possible consequences of this difference in perspective.

The responses of former spouses on the anger scale were not significantly correlated and were significantly different ($p \leq .05$) on the paired t-test. Under these circumstances it is clear that a single informant does not speak for the couple.

Two feelings scales (attachment and former spouse as a parent) and two satisfaction variables (satisfaction with the custody arrangement and satisfaction with the nonparental relationship) are neither significantly correlated nor significantly different for the overall sample of 98 couples. However, the satisfaction with custody variable involves an interesting and conceptually important sex by custody interaction. In both the mother custody and the father custody subsamples the custodial parent is significantly more satisfied than the noncustodial parent. In the joint custody subsample where the custody arrangement seems to provide a more equitable distribution of parental responsibility there are no significant differences in the satisfaction of former spouses. It is also noted that the attachment scale involves significant sex differences within the joint custody sample. Thus when comparisons are made between the mother and joint custody samples we find significant between group differences when men's scores are used, but no differences when women's scores are used. Thus sex by custody interactions may be hidden for variables which are neither significantly correlated nor significantly different in the overall sample. Again we find examples where the perspective of both former spouses is important. This is especially true of the satisfaction with custody variable.

Thus in only eight of sixteen scales and variables considered are responses of former spouses significantly correlated and not significantly different. There are several reasons for believing this is due to differences in the former spouses' perspective rather than to measurement error. First, the scales have been found to be acceptably reliable for each sex. Secondly, similar findings within several custody groups support the reliability of the findings. Some findings such as the sex-custody interaction on the satisfaction variable are quite consistent with equity theory. Finally, the quantitative findings are supported by qualitative data recorded in the interviews. Surely the cost of interviewing multiple informants is justified if needed to obtain adequate information on as many as half of the variables of interest.

Use of Couple Sum or Mean Scores: Salfilios-Rothschild challenges family researchers to conceptualize the unit of analysis as consisting of many points of view. One possible way of doing this is use of couple sum or mean scores. One might occasionally be interested in the total frequency of an event or amount of feeling reported by a couple (e.g. total anger or guilt within the couple relationship). Unfortunately this causes couples who have highly discrepent responses to have the same sum score as those couples who were in agreement and both had a mid-range score (e.g. Mary=1 and John=5 for a sum of 6; Sally and Tom both score 3 for a sum of 6). Furthermore, for a variable such as satisfaction with custody arrangement where there is a sex- custody interaction, important between group differences are lost when sum scores are used. Thus if we are not to miss important data we are limited to using couple scores only for those variables for which a sole respondent would suffice -- variables for which former spouses' responses are both highly correlated and not significantly different.

Use of Couple Discrepency Scores: Discrepency scores, formed by taking the absolute value of the difference between the former spouses' responses, provide an alternative means of utilizing the couple as the unit of analysis. Discrepency scores for the shared events scales, the feelings scales, and the satisfaction variables were summed producing three overall discrepency scores for each couple. The mean of the summed discrepency scores on the shared events scales was 2.88 out of a possible 20 point discrepency. On the feeling scales the mean total discrepency was 4.81 out of a possible 24; on the satisfaction variables with a possible 20 point discrepency, the mean was 6.08. Table 2 illustrates the distribution of the discrepency scores for the shared events and feelings scales and the satisfaction variables. As one might expect there is least discrepency on the shared events scales where respondents report on the frequency of an event within their relationship. Discrepencies in the feelings scales and satisfaction variables reflect the individual nature of these measures where each respondent rates his/her own feelings rather than evaluating the same phenomena on which the former spouse reports, as in the shared events scales. Unlike Booth and Welch (1978) who found spousal consensus poorly correlated across variables, the three overall discrepency scores in our study were significantly correlated ($p < .05$) indicating a group of couples who have relatively high discrepency scores across a range of variables.

Couples are most discrepent on the satisfaction variables. Although this is due in part to the use of variables rather than scale scores in forming the overall discrepency score, the larger discrepencies, as well as the possible theoretical implications[6] make the discrepency in satisfaction score particularly interesting for further investigation. We shall briefly consider several ways in which discrepency scores may be utilized in data analysis and shall use the discrepency in satisfaction score to illustrate these applications.

As already suggested the identification of variables where former spouses' responses differ significantly from one another can contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of the relationship (e.g. differences in perceived involvement of the nonresidential parent) and the relative advantages of various custody arrangements (e.g. significant spousal discrepencies on the satisfaction with custody variable for the sole custody subsamples but not the joint subsample). In these cases the identification of the different perspectives is important information. There is no need to attempt to label the responses of one former spouses as more valid than that of the other. Salfilios-Rothschild recognizes this application of discrepency analysis in her interpretation of data regarding consensus in decision-making.

Another possible application of discrepency data lies in examining the relationship between the extent of discrepency within a couple and other variables of interest. Much of the spousal consensus literature stops with the description of the extent of spousal discrepency (Ballweg, 1969, Booth and Welch, 1978; Douglas and Wind, 1978; Scanzoni, 1965). Others have attempted, with little success, to relate the extent of spousal discrepency to socio-economic factors or to the heterogeneity of these factors (Byrne and Blaylock, 1963; Haberman and Elinson, 1967, Salfilios-Rothschild, 1969; Van Es and Shingi, 1972). Given the limited success of previous researchers to explain discrepency by socio-economic variables as well as the relative homogeneity of our sample, we have not pursued that explanation of discrepency scores. We have however, begun to examine the relationship between the discrepency in satisfaction score and scores on the shared events and feelings scales.

The overall discrepency in satisfaction score was regressed on four of the five shared events scales[7]; separate regressions were performed using men's and women's responses. As Table 3 illustrates couples who were highly discrepent in satisfaction were characterized by high conflict as reported by both men and women. While women's responses on the feeling scales were not good predictors of discrepency in satisfaction, men's feelings were fairly good predictors. (See Table 4)

Insert Tables 3 and 4 Here

Use of discrepency scores as an independent variable is also being explored. We plan to group couples according to the degree of discrepency and then perform MANOVA with variables of interest. We have also been working on developing a typology of postdivorce relationships which utilizes both discrepency and sum scores in a cluster analysis. Additional review of qualitative data in cases identified as highly discrepent may contribute to further understanding of these couples' postdivorce relationship.

SUMMARY

Data from 98 divorced couples supports the importance of using multiple informants in family research. However, conceptualizing the couple as the unit of quantitative analysis poses many problems. Couple sum or mean scores may result in the loss of data and are most appropriate under the same conditions when responses from a sole respondent would suffice (i.e. when the couple's responses are significantly correlated and not significantly different). Thus, for many analyses separate reports of men's and women's responses are needed. The discrepencies in couples' responses provide useful information and should be treated as such rather than attempting to identify the more valid response. Further study of highly discrepent couples may enhance our understanding of family dynamics.

Table 1: Relationship Between Correlations and Paired T-Tests for Shared Events Scales, Feelings Scales, and Satisfaction Variables.

PAIRED T-TEST	CORRELATION: Significant ($p \leq .05$)	CORRELATION: Not Significant ($p > .05$)
Significant ($p \leq .05$)	Conflict Support Non-residential parent involvement	Anger
Not Significant ($p > .05$)	Non-parenting Share Co-parenting Amount of Feelings Guilt Positive Feelings Sat. Time Sat. Amount Co-Parenting Sat. Co-Parenting	Attachment Former Spouse as Parent Sat. Custody Sat. Non-Parenting

Table 7: Frequency Distribution of Overall Discrepency Scores for the Shared Events Scales, Feelings Scales and Satisfaction Variables.

Discrepency Score	Feelings Scales (N=96) %	Shared Events Scales (N=86) %	Satisfaction Variables (N=89) %
≤ 1	-----	1.2	4.5
1 to <2	5.2	18.6	3.4
2 to <3	12.5	31.4	4.5
3 to <4	13.6	28.0	6.7
4 to <5	16.7	11.6	18.0
5 to <6	20.8	7.0	13.5
6 to <7	19.8	1.2	12.4
7 to <8	5.2	1.2	9.0
8 to <9	4.2		3.4
9 to <10	-----		4.5
10 to <11	2.0		11.2
11 to <12			1.1
12 to <13			2.2
13 to <14			2.2
14 to <15			-----
15 to <16			3.4
	100%	100%	100%
	$\bar{X}$=4.812	$\bar{X}$=2.884	$\bar{X}$=6.079
	S.D.=1.920	S.D.=1.260	S.D.=3.481

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis of Discrepency in Satisfaction With Shared Events Scales

Independent Variables	Standardized Regression Coefficient (Beta) Women's Responses (N=77)	Men's Responses (N=77)
Conflict	.379*	.334*
Support	.027	-.207
Nonresidential Parent Involvement	-.135	-.072
Non-parental Relationship	.043	.028
	R^2=.175 F (4,72)=3.809*	R^2=.275 F (4,72)=6.826**

** $p<.001$
* $p<.01$

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis of Discrepency in Satisfaction With Feelings Scales

Independent Variables	Standarized Regression Coefficient (Beta) Women's Responses (N=77)	Men's Responses (N=77)
Amount of Feelings	-.187	.010
Anger	.017	.350
Attachment	.142	-.271
Former Spouse as Parent	-.194	-.280
Guilt	-.002	.072
Positive Feelings	.228	-.036
	R^2=.067 F (6,70)=.836	R^2=.266 F (6,70)=4.225*

* $p < .005$

FOOTNOTES

[1]The authors fail to cite the "previous studies" on which they base their reliance on women's responses. Scanzoni (1965) and Salfilios-Rothschild (1969) suggest they probably were referring to the work of Burgess, Cottrell, Terman, and Wallin whose studies of marital adjustment found responses of men and women highly correlated.

[2]The project, Postdivorce Relationships: The Binuclear Family, is a five year longitudinal design made possible with funds awarded from NIMH (Project #1 Rol MH 34397-01 A) and the University of Wisconsin Graduate School. The first author is Principal Investigator; the second author is a project assistant. The sample consists of 196 divorced parents (98 pairs of former spouses) in maternal (N=54), paternal (N=16) and joint custodial (N=28) arrangements. Both former spouses were interviewed at one year post-divorce (Phase I). They will be re-interviewed at three years (Phase 2) and five years (Phase 3) postdivorce. In addition, new remarriage partners (stepparents) will be interviewed in Phases 2 and 3. For specific findings on the mother custody subsample the reader is referred to Ahrons, 1981, in press.

[3]The mother and father custody subsamples reported on the involvement of the noncustodial parent. The joint custody subsample rated the involvement of the other parent (i.e. mothers rated fathers involvement and fathers rate mothers involvement).

[4]The mother and father custody subsamples reported their satisfaction with the time the noncustodial parent spent with the children. The joint custody subsample reported satisfaction with the time the other parent spent with the children.

[5]A paired or dependent t-test was used to test the hypothesis that the mean discrepency of couples' responses equalled 0.

[6]The possibility of understanding some discrepencies in satisfaction based on equity theory was mentioned earlier when the sex - custody interaction on the satisfaction with custody variable was identified.

[7]To reduce problems of multicollinearity the co-parenting scale was not included in the regression.

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